

VZCZCXRO6051

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DE RUEHIK #0044/01 1501426
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 291426Z MAY 08
FM AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0339
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHIK/AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI 0380

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 THESSALONIKI 000044

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MK](#) [GR](#)

SUBJECT: THE OTHER MACEDONIAN NAME ISSUE: GREECE STUBBORNLY DENIES
EXISTENCE OF MACEDONIAN MINORITY IN NORTHERN GREECE

REF: ATHENS 596

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The name dispute between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece has revived a related controversy about the existence of a Macedonian minority and language in northern Greece. The GoG denies the existence of such a minority, arguing that northern Greece's few "Slavophones" are ethnically Greek. The GoG insists that Muslims are the only minority in Greece. The ethnic Macedonian Rainbow Party and Macedonian Consular Office claim there are over 200,000 ethnic Macedonians in northern Greece. At a recent meeting with Euro MPs, Rainbow accused Greece of violating the minority's human rights. The GoG rejects Rainbow claims as unfounded and irredentist. The dispute has complex historical roots dating back to the early 1900s. While not as prominent as the UN-mediated name dispute with the Republic of Macedonia, the minority name issue is just as neuralgic for Greeks and possibly more challenging to solve. Greek FM Bakoyannis condemned a May 24 statement by Archbishop Stefan of the Macedonian Orthodox Church alluding to a Macedonian language as "irredentist" and "dangerous". END
SUMMARY

PARALLEL REALITIES: GREECE DENIES MINORITY CLAIMS

12. (SBU) The Macedonian name dispute between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia (ref) has revived a long-running controversy in Greece about the existence of a Macedonian minority and language. A Greek political party named Rainbow claims to represent about 200,000 northern Greeks who speak Macedonian (as well as Greek) and consider themselves ethnic Macedonian. Macedonia's Office of Consular and Trade Affairs in Thessaloniki believes 200,000 is a conservative estimate. The Greek government contends that in fact only a handful of Greeks claim to be ethnic Macedonians, and these are too few to constitute a minority. Greek MFA officials insist there is no such thing as a Macedonian ethnicity or language (only an "idiom", or dialect of the Bulgarian language). Rainbow, however, asserts there is a distinct language and that it should be taught in Greek schools attended by ethnic Macedonian children. According to Rainbow, Greece's refusal to recognize a Macedonian minority amounts to a violation of human rights and is a continuation of a long-standing policy to drive out or "Hellenize" northern Greek Macedonians. Greece considers these "Slavophones" to be ethnic Greek, possibly with Bulgarian or Serb heritage.

MACEDONIAN MINORITY PRESSES FOR RECOGNITION

13. (SBU) Lacking support in Greece, Rainbow continues to press for international recognition. It joined the European Parliament coalition "European Free Alliance/The Greens" in May 2004 and participated in the June 2004 European Parliament

elections in Greece, winning only 6,156 votes (less than 0.10%, not enough to win any seats). In 2006, a European NGO sympathetic to Rainbow published and distributed in northern Greece a primary school textbook in Macedonian that was originally published in the early 1900s but taken out of circulation in 1925. Greek academics denounced the re-publication as nationalist propaganda. In April 2007, Rainbow and other Macedonian activists from Greece, Bulgaria and Albania met with State Department officials, members of Congress and members of the U.S.-based organization "United Macedonian Diaspora". Rainbow leader Pavlos Voskopoulos publicly describes the USG as the Macedonian minority's defender against the Greek state.

¶4. (SBU) On April 17, 2008, the Rainbow party and the "Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe" organized a meeting with five Euro MPs in Brussels with the support of the European Free Alliance/The Greens, under the title "The Ignored Minorities in Greece: Western Thrace Turks and Macedonians". Rainbow representatives told the MPs Greece was violating the human rights of the Macedonian minority, while a Helsinki Watch official reportedly testified that in general Greece failed to respect the rights of minorities. While Rainbow claimed the meeting generated positive publicity for the Macedonian cause, other Greek minorities that attended the meeting (Pomaks and Roma) openly disputed some of Rainbow's claims about GoG abuses. The Greek media criticized the initiative as "designed to create tension in the region". Greek Euro MPs protested that they were not invited to participate in the panel.

EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS SUPPORTS MACEDONIANS

¶5. (SBU) Ethnic Macedonians have successfully challenged Greece's treatment of the minority in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In 1998 the ECHR ruled that Greek courts had violated the Human Rights Convention by refusing to register (as a legal entity) an NGO called the "Home of Macedonian Culture" in Florina, a northwestern Greek town near the border

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with Macedonia. Greece nevertheless rejected Home's subsequent applications for registration, on the grounds that Home's use of the name "Macedonia" would provoke strong public reaction and threaten public order. In 2005, the ECHR again ruled that Greece had violated the Convention by not adequately investigating a 1995 attack by an angry mob on Rainbow's party office. According to Rainbow leader Voskopoulos, the ruling changed nothing for the party, and members still feel unsafe. In 2006, an ethnic Macedonian priest, Nikodimos Tsarknias, challenged Greece in the ECHR for convicting and sentencing him in 2004 for conducting mass in the Macedonian language. He expects a verdict by September 2008.

MINORITY ISSUE DATES BACK TO 1903 MACEDONIAN UPRISING

¶6. (SBU) Like most disputes in the Balkans, the controversy has deep historical roots. Greeks who speak Macedonian and identify themselves as Macedonian trace their heritage back to Slavs who first arrived in the region around the 8th century AD. Greek Slavophones claim Greece began suppressing their ethnic identity after a 1903 Slavo-phone uprising in Greek Macedonia and the formation of a "Macedonian" government that lasted about 10 days. Since then, a number of developments have contributed to development of an ethnic Macedonian consciousness and sense of oppression, including the struggle for control of northern Macedonia after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and outbreak of the Balkan Wars; the exodus of over 60,000 Greek Slavophones to Bulgaria in the 1920s and 30s and the subsequent influx of hundreds of thousands of Greeks from Asia Minor; a communist-inspired movement for Macedonian independence; Greek "anti-communist" efforts in the 30s, 40s and 50s to repress Macedonian ethnicity and language; Tito's creation of a Federal People's Republic of Macedonia in 1944; and the independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991.

GREECE CALLS MINORITY CLAIMS IRREDENTIST PROPAGANDA

¶17. (SBU) Greek officials vehemently deny the existence of an ethnic Macedonian minority and dismiss Rainbow claims as irredentist propaganda. First, as a matter of policy, Greece rejects the use of the word "Macedonia" to describe a non-Greek nationality or group. Second, Greek officials and academics contend that the "Slavophones" are predominantly ethnic Greek, even those of Bulgarian or Yugoslav descent. Third, Greece argues that the Slavophones do not meet objective criteria for minority status, i.e. they are too few, lack a distinct culture, language and history. (Note: The GoG claims the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne provides the exclusive definition of minorities in Greece. Accordingly, the government recognizes only a "Muslim minority," not Turkish, Roma or Pomak. It does not officially confer status on any indigenous ethnic groups nor recognize "ethnic minority" or "linguistic minority" as legal terms. End note.) Fourth, some Greek media accuse Rainbow of being an instrument of a U.S. or other foreign-inspired secessionist agenda. During the run-up to the Bucharest NATO Summit, Greek media warned that allowing Skopje to continue using "Macedonia" in its name would encourage Greek Slavophone irredentism.

¶18. (SBU) Greek sensitivity on the Macedonian ethnicity issue is particularly high when the issue is linked to the name dispute. A statement that Archbishop Stefan of Ohrid and Macedonia reportedly made in Rome on May 24 lamenting that "~in our Thessaloniki~speaking and prayer in this [Macedonian] language is forbidden" provoked a sharp rebuke from Greek FM Bakoyannis, who said "such irredentist statements are dangerous for regional cooperation and stability~" Archbishop Stefan, the head of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, denied his remarks implied any "territorial pretensions," according to Macedonian media.

¶19. (SBU) During a recent visit by ConGen staff to Florina, the mayor and other local officials reiterated their view that Rainbow and others had grossly exaggerated the magnitude of the Slavophone minority issue. The few Slavophones who live in the area can express themselves freely, and face no discrimination. One long-time contact who supports the right of Greek Slavophones to call themselves Macedonian told conoffs that Rainbow and its claims of a 200,000 strong constituency were a "fraud". He agreed however, that it was a mistake for the GoG to try to prevent ethnic Macedonians from calling themselves whatever they wanted.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: The controversy highlights Greece's difficulty in reconciling historical grudges with current political reality. Behind Greece's stubborn denial of ethnic Macedonian claims to minority status is the deeply entrenched suspicion that the Slavophones are agents of what they describe as Skopje's plans for a Greater Macedonia, (which the Macedonian government vehemently denies) and descendants of separatist agitators dating back to the early 20th Century. (Embassy Skopje

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comment: The Macedonian Constitution was amended in 1992 to renounce any territorial claims toward any neighboring state. End Embassy Skopje comment.) For most Greeks, the mere fact that the minority claims the name "Macedonian" is sufficient proof of its illegitimacy. Recent public references to the Macedonian minority attributed to Macedonian leaders have strengthened Greek belief in a Greater Macedonian conspiracy. Because of this widespread belief and the long history of antagonism towards the Slavophones, it is unlikely Greece will come to grips with the issue any time soon, even if Greece and the Republic of Macedonia reach agreement on the latter's name. In the meantime, post will encourage both sides of the debate to avoid exaggerating the issue. We will also continue working to steer Greece towards a minority policy that more effectively integrates ethnic Macedonians, Turks, Pomaks, Roma and others.

¶11. (U) This cable was cleared by Embassy Skopje.
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